

# Class Dismissed: A Year in the Life of an American High School, a Glimpse into the Heart of a Nation.

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## Prologue—April 2000 FIRE!

“All students must leave the campus! Evacuate the campus *now!*” The burly school safety officer yells into the bullhorn. “Move it, young people! Everyone off campus! *Go!*”

For the second time in twenty-four hours, every fire truck in Berkeley and a dozen of its police cars scream through the streets, converging on the town’s only high school. Firemen frantically uncoil hoses, gallop into classrooms lugging axes and power saws. Police officers block Milvia Street with their cars, diverting morning rush-hour traffic; others rope off the B building, the C building, the teachers’ parking lot, Memorial Grove, with flapping lengths of yellow tape. “Police Lines. Do Not Cross.”

For the second time in twenty-four hours, smoke billows from the B building, finishing off the damage that yesterday’s fire inflicted on this, the nerve center of the school. It’s all gone now: the administrative, counseling, and security offices; the health center with its counseling rooms, HIV testing kits, and boxes of free condoms; the classrooms specially equipped for English language learners and wheelchair-bound students; the library with its hard-won, brand-new banks of G3 computers. They’re all submerged, now, in water and debris.

For the second time in twenty-four hours, Berkeley High’s thirty-two hundred students, chased from their classrooms by grim-faced safety

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officers with walkie-talkies in one hand and cell phones in the other, mill around the school's central courtyard in the tentative morning sunshine. Some are laughing, some are crying, many are doing first one, then the other. This is Berkeley High's third arson fire in two weeks, its tenth this school year. Last year there were eighteen. Recently the school conducted an emergency evacuation drill, but no Berkeley High student needs practice anymore. They hear the alarms, smell the smoke, grab their backpacks, get out—*quick*.

But even to these crisis veterans, this fire feels different. Serious. "This isn't some kid pulling a prank, a trash can fire like the others," a Berkeley Fire Department official tells a reporter from the *Jacket*, Berkeley High's school paper. "This is a person who is trying to burn down the school."

"Do not return to school today or tomorrow! Do not return to school until after Spring Break!" The safety officer's amplified voice booms across the courtyard, barely audible above the wail of sirens, the rhythmic, regurgitating groan of fire trucks pumping water into the principal's office, the parent-staffed information booth, the records center, where every student's transcript—much in demand now, at the height of college admissions season—is stored. Or was.

"I said *go!* Move it, people!"

Teachers cluster on the steps of the C building, watching as the principal and two vice principals, the assistant superintendent of schools, and the district security supervisor wade through the crowd of agitated students, sweeping them out the school gates and onto an eerily empty Milvia Street. "Can we go inside to get our stuff?" an English teacher asks the security supervisor. "We can't get home without our keys."

The supervisor frowns, barks a few words into his walkie-talkie. He turns back to the teachers, his face impassive behind black wraparound sunglasses. "I'll take you in, one at a time, at your own risk. Who's first?"

It's 9:10 a.m. on April 13, 2000—seven days before the one-year anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting. In Littleton and across the country, commemorations are being planned. All this week the media have been replaying the awful videotapes, retelling the grisly story, rehashing the unanswerable questions. Last year, Berkeley High

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sent a delegation of students to Littleton for the memorial services. "I've always thought this nation needs to pay more attention to our children," one of those students wrote in the *Jacket* upon her return. "After witnessing the outpouring of care and grief in Littleton and across the nation, I am optimistic. I believe that we can take a new path with education and the well-being of our children." That issue of the *Jacket*, dated April 30, 1999, bore the headline, "Arson Plagues BHS."

Spring Break was supposed to start on Monday. Yesterday's fire broke out just after lunch, so afternoon classes were cancelled; today's fire ended the school day before it had quite begun. Now school will be closed tomorrow, too. Some kids appear jubilant about their extended vacation, giving each other high fives, shouting "Spring Break starts now!" Others are sober. Scared. "What if whoever it is plants a bomb next time?" one bell-bottomed, bare-bellied girl asks another. The two of them wrap their arms around each other's narrow waists, bob along in the tide of students rolling across the courtyard and out the Milvia gate. "Some dude be *trippin'*," a boy mutters, his eyes agape as he stares at the smoldering B building. "Some dude be *crazy*."

"Women, children, and doughnuts out first!" The teachers on the steps laugh as a long-time history teacher, known for the trays of pastries he always keeps in his classroom, emerges from the sealed-off C building bearing one of those trays above his head. The teachers, many of them health food devotees, encircle the sweets like lions at the kill, devouring the fried dough as if it offered salvation itself.

"Staff meeting in the community theater—now," Principal Saunders announces into a bullhorn. The teachers follow her across the courtyard and into the theater. Although the hundred and fifty of them fill just the first few rows of the 3,000-person auditorium, Saunders takes the stage, her dark skin gleaming in the footlights.

"There was no bomb," Saunders begins. "That's a good thing."

"Were they looking for a bomb?" one teacher whispers to another.

"But the smoke from the B building is quite pervasive in the C building," Saunders continues. "If you need to go in there to get your things, please know you do so at your own risk."

Theresa Saunders—Berkeley High's fourth principal in ten years—is characteristically composed, delivering distressing information crisply and efficiently, as she has had to do so many times in her less than two years on the job. "The police and fire departments are conducting an investigation. They've contacted the Alameda County Crisis Unit. If the investigation is finished by the end of the day on Friday, we'll start clean-up on Monday. If not . . ."

For the first time during these adrenaline-drenched days, the teachers are invited to consider how they might survive the last eight weeks of the school year—the culmination of the all-important college admissions process, two Proms (Junior and Senior), six graduations (Black Graduation, Chicano/Latino Graduation, Asian/Pacific Islander Graduation, one for each of Berkeley High's two schools-within-a-school, and one for all seven hundred graduating seniors)—without the essential support services that emanated, until yesterday, from the B building.

"We cannot continue like this," Saunders says, her normally steady voice rising. "We can't live like this! Officer Rosie Brown *ran for his life* this morning. He's a trained police officer. He's been stationed at Berkeley High for many years. If Rosie is running for his life on our campus, my God"—the unflappable Saunders looks wild-eyed at the teachers—"what we going to do?"

A gaggle of TV and newspaper reporters, ejected from the staff-only meeting in the theater, have cornered Berkeley's fire chief and assistant school superintendent beneath the canopy of one of Berkeley High's few trees. With news helicopters buzzing overhead, filming from above as firemen cut gaping holes through the B building roof, the impromptu press conference begins.

"What are you going to do to keep this from getting worse?" a TV reporter asks.

"We're putting in cell phones, walkie-talkies, trying to improve the communications system," the assistant superintendent answers. "And we're meeting with the City today—the fire department, police department, the principal, myself—to discuss other measures."

"Do you think the arsonist could be a disgruntled teacher?" a local

newspaper writer asks. With good reason: that same reporter was here two weeks ago, covering the boisterous rally the teachers held to protest their low pay and poor working conditions. It's no secret that after Spring Break, the teachers are scheduled to begin a slow-down, refusing to work more than the six-and-a-half hours per day for which they are paid starting salaries of \$29,000.

"Or an angry student?" another reporter asks. Berkeley High students have had plenty of media coverage this year, too. They've been walking out of classes to demand better pay for their teachers, more funding for programs aimed at closing the yawning achievement gap between white students and students of color, an end to the "paddy wagon sweeps" of downtown Berkeley during which tardy students—and several young people who were neither tardy nor Berkeley High students—were loaded into police vans and hauled back to the school.

"No, no, no," the school official shakes her head.

Suddenly the press conference is interrupted by a burst of activity around the theater. Firemen are summoned from the B building; police and school safety officers run to the scene. A teacher, it turns out, has gone to the women's bathroom, smelled smoke, discovered a freshly lit fire burning in a trash can there.

"To go into the bathroom after we've just had this big meeting about what our next steps are," that teacher says on the five o'clock news that night, "and to smell smoke *again* in a completely different building is unnerving. It makes me not want to be here."

"The students don't feel safe here," a history teacher says into the camera. "And I think they have good reason not to feel safe."

"There was a fire just last week in another building," a mother in dreadlocks adds, the ravaged B building, flooded school grounds, and a snake pit of fire hoses visible behind her. "So do I keep my kids here and wait for someone to get hurt, knowing it could be one of my kids? Or do I find some alternative? And what is the alternative?"

*What is the alternative, indeed?*